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# PARTIES AND NATIONAL WELFARE

BY A. MAURICE LOW

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ENGLAND having taken from Rome the party system, it was from England that the United States took the party and incorporated it into its political institutions. Theoretically nothing could be more in accord with democratic principles. Among a free people there must always be a division of opinion, and that difference of opinion must be fought out first among the people themselves and then among the delegates of the people in the national assembly, whether it be Roman Senate or British Parliament or American Congress. Theoretically again, it is the only way by which liberty can be preserved and progress made. A governing class, whether it is a class that governs by the accident of birth or the accident of popular favor, is always under the temptation to forget the rights of the governed and to arrogate to itself autocratic powers. Hence the theory of parties in politics, and the balance of opposing forces. The party in power must be both checked and stimulated by the opposition; if it goes too fast the opposition serves as the brake; if it becomes lethargic and lags when energy is required, the opposition supplies the necessary energy. Let parties cease to exist and self-government is in danger.

We, Englishmen as well as Americans, have been brought up from childhood to believe in the truth of these generalizations. We who have read our English history and remember how the barons, acting as the opposition, wrested from King John the Great Charter and how reform was slowly fought through those long years when the sovereign not only reigned, but ruled; who recall that time when an obstinate king and his even more stupid ministers were driving a loyal people into revolt, accept as a matter of faith the party, and a political system in which there shall always be a ma-

jority and a minority; in which men shall wear a party brand and oppose as a matter of conviction that which their opponents champion. The system has the sanction of antiquity and is entitled to the respect due to tradition buttressed in custom. It may not be perfect we are frequently told, but despite its imperfections it has worked fairly well, and what other system can be suggested that would be an improvement?

Now it is a curious thing that this nearly perfect system is only a fair weather craft, and invariably founders whenever subjected to stress. The party system works smoothly so long as it is under no great strain, but in time of national emergency it is almost always abandoned. The proof of the seaworthiness of a vessel is not when it is tied up at a dock, but when it buffets the waves. The great ship that, despite its shining brasswork and luxurious accommodations, had to jettison its ornamental trappings as soon as the barometer fell would not be accepted by naval architects as the last word in shipbuilding. That is what happens to the party system. When nothing greater is at stake than an experiment which may cause inconvenience, but cannot work irretrievable disaster, we in England as well as you in America are content to take chances, because we know that today's mistake can be repaired tomorrow; but when life or death hangs on instant decision, when the fate of a nation rests on immediate action, then we throw parties to the wind and ask for something more vital than a brand.

Englishmen take their politics seriously and are stricter party men than Americans, yet the Englishman, despite his adherence to party, has not hesitated to cast his party system overboard when crisis threatened. Not to go back to the past, it is only necessary to see what has happened since the outbreak of the war. When war was declared Mr. Asquith, a Liberal, was Prime Minister and the members of his Cabinet were all Liberals, but the Unionists, his political opponents, decided that the opposition should virtually cease to exist during the continuance of the war and they would not attempt to profit by party advantage. The war compelled the creation of new offices, and the appointees were selected without regard to political affiliations, but because they were supposed to be the men best qualified to fill them, although the Government was still, in a party sense, "Liberal"; when, later, Mr. Asquith found it necessary to reorganize the Gov-

ernment a coalition Cabinet was formed; today we have Mr. Lloyd George—before the war a Liberal so advanced that he was contemptuously termed by his Conservative opponents a “Socialist”—the head of a Cabinet composed of ultra Tories, moderate Conservatives, Liberals, and extreme Liberals. In a word, the party system has disappeared so far as England is concerned. In the past a Liberal Premier appointed Liberals to office; a Conservative would have considered it as impossible to call a Liberal to his side as for the Pope to create a Protestant a cardinal. And not only has this been done in England, but also in France, Belgium, Italy, and Russia. In those countries, as in England, the party system is in abeyance and the party Cabinet has been displaced by the coalition.

That the party system is worthless in an emergency is so self-evident that it is not open to argument, and that being the truth it may be asked why peoples of the highest civilization and intelligence, who are continually seeking the perfection of government, still cling to it and believe with all sincerity that to abandon it when conditions are normal would be a backward step. What originally signified devotion to a cause and the symbol of principle has become cheapened and corrupted, without meaning, a vehicle for dishonesty, and an injury to the body politic. We have degraded party politics to make them serve man instead of doing service to the state in the same way that we have obscured the meaning of religion by meticulous regard for dogma and ceremonial. O. Henry, usually the most genial of philosophers, was right when in a burst of unwonted cynicism he declared that “Wherever you find a god you’ll find somebody waiting to take charge of the burnt offerings.”

It is the burnt offerings of the party system that have kept it alive and must eventually destroy it. It has become perverted into a negation of what it was originally devised to accomplish. Intended to promote good government, to make for efficiency, to prevent corruption, to center responsibility with power, and yet to place a check upon unlimited power, it has defeated its purposes. Partisan government—that is, government by parties—is the most fruitful source of corruption, frequently the sure invitation to inefficiency, often the readiest means to escape responsibility and yet to enable the majority to become possessed of unwarranted power. The great evil of the party system is that it robs

the individual of his independence and makes him merely part of an organization. The Member of Parliament, the Deputy, the Member of Congress, in those legislative assemblies where there are "blocks" and the membership is split up into "left" and "right" and "centre" and other party divisions, must either blindly follow their leaders, submit to the command of the caucus or conference and obey the orders of the whip or suffer the penalty of excommunication. When a man enters the legislature and enrolls himself in the party he surrenders his will to his party. A party man remains a party man so long as he votes with and supports his party, but let him oppose his party or vote against it and he is no longer a party man in good standing; he is there under false pretenses, and honor and self-respect require that he shall "cross the floor," to use the English parliamentary expression—that is, join the opposing party, which may appeal to him as little as the one he would like to leave.

Yet we are told that in a representative government parties are a necessity and that free government could not exist were it not for parties. Let us see how much of this is truth or simply superstition. There are certain great principles on which men must divide, which may well be made the party article of faith. One can very well understand that slavery or liberty admit of no compromise; that on such great principles parties should be founded, and to them men pledge their allegiance. There are a few great questions which may well serve as the cornerstone of party, but they come at long intervals, once in many generations. In the meantime, government concerns itself with the things which are not principle, but expediency, about which men may differ as to details, but are agreed as to fundamentals.

Let us go back to that happier time when men's minds were not solely engrossed with thoughts of international slaughter. A session of Congress (and much the same thing applies to a session of Parliament) would concern itself with one or two important measures of a controversial and party character, and the rest of its time would be devoted to the routine business of government. The important measures, if the Democrats were in control at Washington or the Liberals in London, met with the opposition of Republicans or Conservatives not because they were bad measures, or unnecessary measures, or measures injurious to the country, but simply because "the business of an opposition is to

oppose." That is the only justification for the existence of an opposition. If it did not oppose it would cease to be an opposition, and if there was no opposition the parliamentary system would be destroyed. Consequently no measure can be given consideration strictly on its merits. "Of course we expect the Republicans to fight it," Democratic leaders will say about their great bill of the session. Their expectations are never disappointed. The bill will be fought because it is the bill offered by the other party; the minority will miss no opportunity to expose the bill's weaknesses or crudities, but will make little attempt to strengthen it; and should they, in a moment of forgetfulness, offer a valuable suggestion nine times out of ten it will be rejected, for the principle of party government holds that a bad bill of the party is better than a bill perfected by the opposition.

We shall be told by the devotees of the party system that this is the true function of party: that the country, having sinned with knowledge in electing the wrong party, the minority cannot sanction any of its legislation. Being in the minority it is powerless to oppose, but it can obstruct and criticise and can at least decline to have any share in legislation which, by implication, it is pledged to repeal as soon as it shall once more be entrusted with power. In a word, legislation enacted by a Democratic majority must be so bad that a Republican will repudiate it at the first opportunity.

But in practice this is not true. Some of the most bitterly contested legislation has not been repealed when the opposing party had the power, but, on the contrary, the former minority, now become the majority, has accepted the contentious legislation, at times strengthened it, and gone further with it than even its authors dared or hoped for.

I give a few illustrations taken at random: Every student of American politics recalls the bitter partisanship aroused when Mr. Reed was elected Speaker and had the courage and wisdom to change the rules of the House of Representatives so as to destroy filibustering. Mr. Reed was denounced as a czar and tyrant, abused on the floor and slandered in the newspapers, but when, a few years later, the Democrats were in the majority instead of throwing out the Reed Rules they accepted them substantially as they stood; only, for the sake of consistency, they made a few minor changes and took off the Republican curse by rechristening them the Crisp Rules, Mr. Crisp at that time being the Democratic Speaker. The

whole world recognizes the importance of the Federal Reserve System. Here was a reform most urgently needed, an economic problem in no sense political except that in a democracy every question—social, moral, or economic—loses its real character and under the poison of party becomes political. The efforts of Senator Aldrich and his Republican associates to modernize the fiscal system encountered the strenuous opposition of the Democrats, who were able to prevent Congressional action. When the Democrats came into power they made the discredited Aldrich scheme a party measure. It is true that the Democrats, to salve their conscience, made certain changes, but the fact remains that the law as we now have it is in substance the measure offered by Mr. Aldrich which the Democrats opposed; which they opposed simply because they were in opposition; which they would not allow to be passed simply because the requirements of party slavery required it should be defeated; which they preferred to see defeated rather than join with their political opponents in improving it, and by its defeat injury was done to the country. That is too often the effect of party. The welfare of the country is held to be of slight consequence compared with party success.

We have seen the same thing so often in England that we have become hardened, and accept it as a matter of course. English laws are administered rigorously, and crime seldom goes unwhipped of justice, but there is one crime that may be committed with impunity. Let a man purloin a handkerchief and he must answer to the magistrate, but a political party may steal the opposing party's entire wardrobe and turn it out naked to shiver in the icy blast of minority without fear of the policeman's heavy hand. In fact, the British public, taking its politics cynically (although, paradoxically, seriously), enjoys the discomfiture of the politicians stripped of their garments and amuses itself by speculating what changes their new owners will make to bring them into fashion. Liberals have poached on Conservative preserves no more flagrantly than Republicans have raided Democratic cupboards. In politics larceny, grand or petit, is not an indictable offense.

The defenders of the party system while stoutly contesting not alone for its necessity, but by a strained construction trying to find in it a virtue, forfeit their consistency at a certain point and thereby prove that government is possible

without party. In England the Speaker of the House of Commons has long ceased to be a partisan, and although he enters the House as a party man, on reaching the Chair he is purified from the dross of party politics. He is the presiding officer, his duties being to enforce the rules impartially, to show neither fear nor favor, to know nothing of party strife. An English Speaker who would lower the dignity of his office to make it a political asset to the party of which he is nominally a member would quickly be degraded, and no one would more sharply resent the dragging of the Speakership in the party mire than the men of his own political faith. In England so extra-political is the Speakership that it is an unwritten custom for him to be returned unopposed from his constituency; he is the one member of the House who may take no active part in the electoral campaign, and although the majority of the House may have changed since he was first elected Speaker he is retained in office to signify that the Speakership is a judicial rather than a political office.

The Speaker of the House of Representatives has not been entirely divorced from politics, but a long journey has been made on the road upon which Englishmen have traveled. Until a few years ago no member of the House of Representatives could aspire to the Speakership unless he had given unmistakable evidence of his violent and courageous partisanship—"courageous" being interpreted to mean that his vision was microscopic when advantage was to be gained for his own party and myopic when his opponents were concerned. He was required to know the rules of the House so that usually he might interpret them for the benefit of his own side. He packed committees to promote certain approved legislation. In short, in his official capacity he was too often an unscrupulous partisan who did not hesitate to stretch the rights of majority to the limit while abridging those of the helpless minority, but in his private relations he was a conscientious and estimable citizen with a fine sense of honor and a detestation of trickery and sharp practice. As Speaker he must do the things expected of him; not to have done them would have been disloyal to the men who had honored him; so he did them gladly and without wretch to his conscience, for it was all part of the accepted party system.

To the sorrow of your dyed-in-the-wool party man this has been changed. The Speakership is now a place of dis-



tion and additional emolument, but it has been shorn of its autocratic power. The American Speaker is still a recognized politician, but he no longer controls legislation, and he dare not attempt to ride roughshod over the minority. The majority, of course, has the power to make the rules, but those rules must be applied impartially and fairly interpreted; were the Speaker to prostitute his office by favoritism or the abuse of the minority his own party and the country at large would show its disapproval.

Having accomplished one great reform by taking the Speakership out of politics, to the advantage of politics and the business of government, may it not be that the time is coming when the party can be taken out of politics? It sounds paradoxical, of course; to some persons so absurd, perhaps, that it is not worthy of serious discussion; yet reflection will show that it is neither absurd nor impossible, although, I admit, the days of the politician are not numbered. It is possible, I conceive, for a House of Commons or a House of Representatives to be elected on a single great issue: on peace or war, tariff or free trade, universal service or disarmament, prohibition or liquor, state socialism or *laissez faire*, regulation or non-interference, government control or private ownership, imperialism or parochialism, which great issues under our present system of party politics become a party question by mere chance. It is simply fortuitous whether, for instance, prohibition shall be a Democratic or a Republican "policy," but if circumstances make it a Democratic policy, or if it was the policy of their grandfathers, then it becomes a sacred heritage, and automatically it must be opposed by the Republicans. Now the truth is, as every sensible man knows, that if, for example, the great question before the country today is prohibition, honest men, their politics aside, will desire to vote according to their convictions, but the majority of them dare not because of their party obligations. If you elect members of the House as prohibitionists or anti-prohibitionists, pro or con any other question, the sentiment of the country can be fairly tested, and when the great question is decided—decided, as it ought to be, by the vote of the majority—all other subjects coming before the House can be treated not as party questions, but on their merits.

Would anything be gained? Undoubtedly, because in the first place the standard of Congressional representation

would be immensely raised. The State or district is seldom represented by its best men—best, that is to say, in the sense of the highest intellect or character—not because the best men are unwilling to serve, but because of the wretched party system. “Medicine is too often a practice of trusting to nature and confirming the diagnosis at the autopsy,” a cynic has remarked, and we follow much the same practice in electing our Representatives, accepting them haphazard on party faith only to discover their unfitness when it is too late. There are Democratic States and districts just as there are Republican States and districts; so, at the very beginning, men admittedly of the highest qualifications are barred if they are unfortunate enough to be of the minority faith. That in itself lowers the tone, as it restricts representation to one party, and that party, knowing it has nothing to fear from the opposition, does not feel compelled to put forward its best men. Abolish party and you afford an opportunity for the best men to be selected, but you do more than that. Men of high standing and great capacity, who would be tempted to enter politics, refuse, because they will not make themselves servient to a party organization or surrender their freedom of action to the party caucus, but the man of easy convictions or limited mental equipment is only too glad to be relieved of the burden of responsibility and to vote as he is directed, and that is the type of man who is always the truest party man and is loudest in denouncing as a traitor the man who shows his independence.

A man about to make his will and thinking of the welfare of his wife and children selects as his executor a man of clear judgment and proved honesty, rather than one whose judgment is doubtful and his honesty uncertain, no matter how reliable his politics may be. Government, in the main, is business, pure and simple. There is a certain amount of “policy,” just as there is in every large mercantile establishment, in every household—for every father and mother must have their domestic code, their “policy,” in fact. But that established, whether in government or the shop or the household, the rest is business. Honesty, efficiency, economy, morality—these are things government ought to strive for, but which cannot be attained so long as they are tossed about between parties and made the football of politicians.

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